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PUN TRANSLATION OR THE BEST OF THE WORST

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Introduction

One of the key questions facing humour theorists is the role of incongruity, and its resolution, in achieving the humorous effect of a joke. The notion of **incongruity** refers to *some degree of absurdity, illogicality or violation of expectation.* An incongruity is, very roughly, the cognitive conflict that arises when something *unexpected* happens or is being said.

Humour is created by a multistage process in which an initial incongruity is created, and then some further information causes that incongruity to be resolved.

A joke is analysed as being in two main parts: the initial portion of text, the set-up (or *joke body*) and the second part, the punch or punchline. The **setup** creates no particular incongruity that the audience is aware of, but the **punchline**, at least initially, does not make immediate sense. Subsequently, a way is found to allow the punchline to be congruous (the resolution). Consider, for example, the following joke, taken from Blake (2007: 4)

(1) *My husband and I divorced because of religious differences:*
He thought he was God and I didn't.

While the first line in the joke could make us think that one partner in the marriage was Protestant and the other Catholic, or that one was Jewish and the other Christian, the second line, i.e. the punchline, shatters our expectation, where 'religious differences' is given an unexpected interpretation.

Many theories of humour base themselves around the notion of **incongruity** or opposition, most notably the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (Raskin 1985) and the subsequent General Theory of Verbal Humour (or GTVH) (Attardo and Raskin 1994). In Raskin's theory, humor involves the activation of two opposing **scripts**[1] and arises when one of two opposing scripts is activated, followed by the activation of the second opposing script, creating **ambiguity.** Thus, there are three stages. In the first stage, one script (or schema) is activated. In the second stage, information that is incongruent with that schema is activated, creating ambiguity. In the final stage, the ambiguity is resolved. Actually, it is the resolution of this ambiguity, or incongruity, which causes a text/the sentence to be humorous.

According to Raskin (1985: 114), many jokes contain a **script switch trigger**, i.e. an element which triggers the switch from one script evoked by the text of the joke, to the opposed script, switch that makes up the joke: "The punchline triggers the switch from one script to the other by making the hearer backtrack and realize that a different interpretation was possible from the very beginning" (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 308).

Consider, for example, another joke, mentioned by Norrick (2006: 425):

(2) *A panholder came up to me today and said he hadn't had a bite in weeks, so bit him.*

The key phrase which functions as the script switch trigger in the joke is 'had a bite', so the translator's task is that of finding a functionally equivalent lexical unit in the sense of making the whole utterance generate humour through the speaker's pretense in evoking one script while believing another.

The translations we propose for joke (2) are:

a. *Un cerşetor a venit către mine azi plângând şi mi- a spus că nu a înghiţit nimic de săptămâni, aşa că l- am sfătuit să- şi înghită lacrimile.*

b. *Un cerşetor a venit către mine azi şi mi-a spus că nu a înghiţit nimic de săptămâni, aşa că l-am avertizat că sunt o înghiţitură/îmbucătură cam mare.*

As can be noticed, the pun is activated by the clash between polysemous lexical items, i.e. E. *have a bite/bite* and R. *a înghiţi/ înghiţitură*, respectively.

1. On humour and translation

The discussion of the relationship between humour and translation is perhaps best started by addressing a debate that has dominated much of humour research: that of the untranslatability of certain kinds of linguistic humour.

Traditionally, **linguistic humour** has been assigned to two groups on the basis of its translatability. Already Cicero distinguished between **verbal humour** (*facetiae dicto*) (i.e. involving the phonemic/graphemic representation of the humorous element) that is untranslatable, and **referential humour** (*facetiae re*) (Attardo 1994: 27) that is translatable, a division corresponding to that used by several modern scholars.

As useful as the categorisation above may have proved once, it ultimately relies on the somewhat outdated notion of strict formal equivalence. Modern translation studies have concentrated more on **functional considerations** and **the equivalence of effect.**

Neubert and Shreve (1992: 144) point out that "equivalence is not really a relationship between textual surfaces; it is a relationship of textual **effect** - of communicative value" (emphasis added), whereas Laurian (1992) suggests that while verbal humour may not be translatable within strict formal equivalence, it can, depending on the capacity of a translator, be translated functionally. According to her, the functional approach to humour translation could be considered also when it comes to referential humour because much of referential humour draws from culture-bound elements that may not have the desired effect in the TL audience. Also Catford (1965: 94 ff), while not referring to humour translation in particular, distinguished between **linguistic and cultural untranslatability.**

In translation studies, emphasis has gradually shifted towards cultural issues, which has had profound implications for translating humour as well. Nedergaard-Larsen (1993: 211), among other scholars, has drawn a table of the variety of culture-bound problems translators may encounter in their work. While this also applies to humour, the whole issue of translating humour is rather more complex, because a translator not only has to judge whether the TL reader understands the humour in a given text but also to know or guess **whether the humour functions as humour in the target culture**. Humour is, therefore, both a social phenomenon and a cultural one.

Wordplay, combining *formal similarity* and *semantic dissimilarity* (Delabastita 1993, qtd. in De Geest 1996), is a good example of humour being culture-specific. It is culturally bound in that culture defines what kind of wordplay is appropriate and that

recognising and appreciating it requires background knowledge (Leppihalme 1996b). When translating wordplay from the SL to the TL, a translator has basically three options available: **wordplay, some other rhetorical device or no wordplay** (Leppihalme 1996b). The choice between the options at hand is not simple. Quite the contrary, it includes both textual and extratextual concerns. SL wordplay may contain, for example, elements that are unacceptable, or even taboo, according to TL norms and that may have to be played down for TL purposes. One could say that the translator necessarily rewrites humour for the TL audience following, at least to some extent, the norms accepted in the target culture.

One might ask if translating humour is fundamentally different from any other form of translation; after all, it is often agreed that successful translation involves recreating in the TL text those features of the SL text that are relevant for the text to function for a certain purpose (see Kussmaul 1995: 90). With a humorous text, the purpose is, for all practical purposes, always the same: to elicit laughter. In a way the translator has less latitude with a humorous text, in that the translation should be able to function for the TL audience in a maximally similar way as the original text did for the SL audience, even if this were achieved by substantially altering it. Balancing between SL restrictions and TL demands, the translator is engaged in what could be compared to an exercise in tightrope walking, in that the immediacy of effect can easily be lost.

Wordplay, or punning, was defined by Delabastita (1996: 128) broadly as "textual phenomena contrasting linguistic structures with **different meanings** on the basis of their **formal similarity"** (emphasis original). For the purposes of a more fine-grained typology, puns can be further divided into such categories as homonymy, homophony, homography, and paronymy according to the type and degree of similarity (Delabastita 1996: 128). However, labelling can be problematic, since we are dealing with a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon, which sometimes defies easy categorisation. The same applies to translation; and discussions on the untranslatability of humour have often centred around the various forms of wordplay.

The **purpose** of the present paper is to show whether puns are really language-specific and never accessible to translation, as Sornig (2006: 295) pessimistically states:

> Puns are a kind of playful handling of lexical items whose similarities in surface structure are contrasted with differences in deep, semantic structure. … (Homophonic) Puns are intrinsically language-specific and therefore almost never accessible to translation. Punning is the skilled and creative native speaker's privilege and hallmark and consequently none of the foreigner's business.

2. From ambiguity to humour

Ambiguity is a central device in much verbally-expressed humour: "Deliberate ambiguity will be shown to underlie much, if not all of verbal humour" (Raskin 1985).

Loosely speaking, ambiguity occurs when a linguistic item (e.g. a sentence, a portion of a sentence or even a discourse) has one representation at one level (e.g. phonetically) but more than one representation at another level (e.g. semantically).

Ambiguity is the semantic characteristic of lexical items and syntactic structures of allowing for more than one semantic interpretation in a certain context, a case in which the interpreter of a certain piece of linguistic discourse encounters difficulties in mentally processing the meaning of the message. Ambiguity can be a **lexical**

phenomenon, arising from homonymy or polysemy or **syntactic**, arising from the possibility of alternative constituent structures. Cruse (1986: 66) proposes four types of ambiguity:

a. **Pure syntactic ambiguity**: *old men and women*

b. **Quasi-syntactic ambiguity**: *a red pencil*

c. **Lexico-syntactic ambiguity**: *We saw her duck*

d. **Pure lexical ambiguity**: *He reached the bank.*

Pure syntactic ambiguity involves identical lexical units and is based on the way the elements are grouped together. For example, the meaning of *old men and women* differs according to whether *old* goes with *men* only, i.e. [old men] and women or with *men and women*, i.e. old [men and women].

Quasi syntactic ambiguity can often be taken for lexical ambiguity because not only are the lexical units identical for the two readings but they are identically grouped, too. Thus, *a red pencil* has two interpretations i.e. (i) a pencil painted red and (ii) a pencil which writes red; therefore the adjective red can apply to the whole of the referent of the noun that it accompanies, or to a salient, or major functional part of it.

Lexico-syntactic ambiguity could also be called 'morphological' ambiguity because the lowest level at which there are multiple representations is morphological: e.g. the readings of *duck* (as a noun or as a verb)

To this typology we can add the **semantic-pragmatic** type of **ambiguity** mentioned and exemplified in Ritchie (2004: 42):

(3) "Diner: *Waiter! There is a fly in my soup!*

Waiter*: Please don't shout so loudly – everyone will want one*".

In this example, the humour is based on the waiter's presumably deliberate misconception about the nature of the speech act involved. The waiter can be seen as misinterpreting the diner's utterance as a boast or cry for pleasure rather than a complaint, forcing the audience to see this alternative interpretation.

The next example describes an amusing but embarrassing situation and is based on a misinterpreted gesture:

> (4) 'A sociology professor at the local college was fond of telling off-colour jokes, a fact which embarrassed the young ladies in his class tremendously…. Finally the girls got together and decided that at the next hint of an off colour joke they would get up en masse and leave the classroom. They sat there primly awaiting his next lecture. Sure enough, he began with the words 'There is a terrible shortage of prostitutes in Singapore. The girls looked at each other, rose and started to leave. He called after them: Don't go now, girls. The boat doesn't leave for Singapore until Friday.' (Heller 1974: 281 qtd. in Ritchie, 2004: 113)

The next pun, also based on semantic-pragmatic ambiguity, requires knowledge of the context in which it was produced to qualify as funny:

e.g. "*Basescu si-a Bush-it iar masina*". (headline at Realitatea TV)

Following Ritchie (2004: 114) we can say that informally, **a context** may include facts about the world, cultural information, salient objects in the surrounding environment, recently mentioned concepts, etc.

2.1 Lexical ambiguity is common to all human languages. Indeed, it is a fundamental defining characteristic of a human language: a relatively small and finite set of words is used to denote a potentially infinite space of meaning and so we find that many words are open to different semantic interpretations depending on the context. These interpretations can be called word senses (Edmonds 2006: 607).

Homonymy is a highly language-specific phenomenon, an accident occurring in a particular language because of (1) divergent sense development or (2) convergent sound development. Although a language without homonymy would be a more efficient medium of communication, punning seems to be impossible to imagine without homonymy.

English is believed to have nearly 4000 homophonous pairs (Blake 2007: 69) and Romanian translators of English may feel really challenged and if not helpless when asked to preserve the original humorous effects achieved through the use of homonyms like as in the following:

(5) ***March*** *planned before April.* (headline in 'The Guardian')

(6) *I do* ***miss*** *my husband but my aim is getting better.*

(7) *How did the cat stop the VCR?*

It pressed the ***paws*** *button.*

(8) *It is not in my* ***interest*** *to pay the* ***principal*** *not in my* ***principle*** *to pay the* ***interest****.*

(R. B. Sheridan in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 127)

In example (6), found among Mrs. Murphy's Words of Wisdom, incongruity results from the two meanings of *miss*, **1.** feel sad about sb. and **2** fail to hit a distant object, while in example (7) the source of ambiguity/incongruity is the homophony of *pause* and *paws*.

The next joke seems to draw even more creatively on the partial homonymy of *miss*, thus proving that a native punster is hard to compete with when it comes to translation:

(9) *I used to go* ***missing*** *a lot:* ***Miss*** *Canada,* ***Miss*** *United Kingdom,* ***Miss*** *World.*

(George Best in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 23)

Within the category of homonymy-based puns we can also include **puns across word boundaries**, i.e. puns that run over word boundaries, which we believe are also difficult to render in a target language:

(10) *With her marriage she got a new name and* ***a dress****.*

The next example, (11), is a motto adopted by linguists at a conference in USA and mentioned in Blake (2007: 77). Because linguists use an asterisk to mark ungrammatical sentences, the motto emblazoned on T-shirts at this particular conference read like (11):

(11) *Be ungrammatical. You only have your* ***ass*** *to risk.*

(12) *Why did the cookie cry?*

Because its mother had been ***a wafer*** *so long.*

The examples presented so far are enough evidence to make us conclude at this point that puns based on homonymy which are not normally translatable are the hardest task for a translator engaged in transferring the pun in the target language.

Polysemy is the relationship that exists between different senses of a word that are related in some logical manner rather than arbitrarily. Regarding polysemy, Blake (2007: 74) has a more optimistic view of punning possibilities across languages: "The

development of polysemy in one language may be matched by a parallel development in another". That this is not always so can be seen in the next examples:

(13) *Signor Angeli, Professor of Italian at Trinity College, Dublin, was asked to translate the proceedings of the opening of Queen's College Cork into Italian and forward them to the Pope. He reported the fact that the ceremony was attended by both men and women as 'there were present* ***men*** *of both sexes', which led the cardinal to observe that Cork must be a very* ***queer*** *city.*
(Robert Kane, in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 52)

(14) *I* ***have*** *the body of an eighteen year old. I keep it in the fridge.*

(15) *Schoolboy suspended by the* ***head****.* (article headline)

(16) *It would go against my* ***religion*** *if I drank tea or coffee.*
(Brendan Behan in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 19)

(17) *Dublin University contains the cream of Ireland – rich and* ***thick.***
(Samuel Becket in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 15)

(18) *My church accepts all* ***denominations*** *– fivers, tenners, twenties.*
(Dave Allen in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 13)

2.2 Syntactic or structural ambiguity occurs when a phrase or sentence has more than one underlying structure, such as the sentence *Visiting relatives can be boring*. This type of ambiguity is also said to be structural because a phrase or sentence can be represented in two structurally different ways: [Visiting relatives] can be boring, i.e. Relatives that visit us can be boring and Visiting [relatives] can be boring, i.e. To visit relatives can be boring.

In the examples below, humorous effects are achieved through the categorial ambiguity of *poor* (example 19) and *bathe vs bath* (example 20), respectively:

(19) *Lawyers give* ***poor*** *legal advice.* (article headline)

(20) *Do you like* ***bathing*** *beauties?*
I don't know. I've never ***bathed*** *any.* (Blake 2007: 84)

(21) *Henry is* ***an old woman chaser.***

(22) *I saw* ***a woman carrying a baby and a sumo wrestler.***

In example (19) the ambiguity can be accounted for in terms of a difference of constituent structure: under one interpretation, lawyers give advice to the poor people - [Lawyers give poor] legal advice - and under the other, lawyers do not give good advice – Lawyers give [poor advice].

The phrase *bathing beauties* in (20) is ambiguous because under one interpretation, 'bathing beauties' is related to a sentence in which *beauties* is the subject of *bathe* or *are bathing*, and under the other, to a sentence in which *beauties* is the object of *bath* (Cf. *Beauties bathe* vs. *You bath beauties*).

2.3. Another source of ambiguity and humour in English is **the addition of a prepositional phrase** to a verb phrase like in examples (23), (24) and (25):

(23) *He arrived to attend her son's wedding* ***with Mr. Brown.***

(24) *She told me she was going to have a baby* ***in the middle of Oxford Street.***

(25) A: *How's your wife?*
B: *She's in bed* ***with the doctor.***
A: *She couldn't be too bad, then.*

These examples do not raise difficulties when translated into Romanian probably because prepositional phrase addition is also a common pattern used as a source of ambiguity and humour in Romanian, too [2].

3. Paradigmatic, transpositional and syntagmatic puns or how to challenge a translator

3.1. A **paradigmatic pun** is a pun where some string in the utterance is similar to some other string NOT in the utterance. A *syntagmatic pun* is a pun in which the utterance contains one or more similar parts.

The former type involves phonetic-lexical ambiguity derived from sources such as homonymy (26) or polysemy (27) and (28).

(26) *A shopper is walking along, and a keek falls from his shopping bag to the ground, unnoticed. Another shopper calls out, Hey! Your bag's* ***leeking****!* (Ritchie 2004: 115)

(27) *Q: I'm two months pregnant now. When will my baby* ***move****?*
A: With any luck, right after he finishes school. (Yus 2003: 1324)

(28) *An Irish* ***queer*** *is a fellow who prefers women to drink.*

Phonetic-lexical ambiguity is not a necessary condition for a pun. In the next two examples there is a looser form of phonetic similarity between strings.

(29) *Some South American stamps are un-boliviable.* (headline cited in *Have I Got News For You* BBC TV, May 2002 and mentioned in Ritchie, 2003: 115).

3.2. Transpositional puns involve swapping words or parts of words. For transpositional puns the starting point is a well known expression or phrase like in the examples below:

(30) *It's a well-known fact that if you want an improvement in your working conditions, you should always tackle your boss about your issues one at a time. After all, you should never* ***put all your begs in one ask-it****.* (Dedopulos 1998: 83)

(31) *A drama critic is one who* ***leaves no turn unstoned.***
(Gerge Bernard Shaw in Des Mac Hale, I*rish Wit,* p. 117)

(32) *Work is the curse of* ***the drinking classes****.* (Oscar Wilde in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 117)

As can be noticed, the puns in (30) and (31) depend on the sound similarity of the idioms 'put all your eggs in one basket' vs 'put all your begs in one ask-it' and *leave no stone unturned* vs. *leave no turn unstoned*.

Transpositional puns are difficult to create, very commonly hard to understand and translate.

3.3. Syntagmatic puns are texts in which both of the similar strings occur. In (30) below, the two strings are related by morpheme-level metathesis:

(33) *It is better* ***to be looked over*** *than* ***to be overlooked.***

The next example (34) also contains two almost similar strings with different meanings:

(34) What do you call a strange market?
A bizarre bazaar.

(35) *The motto of Irish rugby has always been* ***'kick ahead any head'*** (Fergus Slaterry in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 130)

(36) *Men come of age* ***at sixty,*** *women* ***at sixteen****.* (James Stevens in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 130)

(37) *Life is* ***one fool thing after another****, whereas love is* ***two fool things after each***

other (Oscar Wilde in Des Mac Hale, *Irish Wit*, p. 143)

(38) *Some cause happiness* ***wherever they go****, others* ***whenever they go****.*

To conclude this part, we follow Raskin (1985: 141-142) and say that successful puns have both the relevant structural properties and the right kind of semantic content, while bad puns are those which merely meet the weakest structural requirements but have little else to say.

Conclusions

Humorous discourse and verbal play, in general, intersects with the wider study of creativity in language. If we look at wordplay as *a form of layman's poetry* (Chiaro 1992: 123), we can understand why, not infrequently, humour is characterized by some extra difficulties (not encountered in translating straight referential prose) that compare with the difficulties faced in the translation of literary texts and especially poetry. Language-specific jokes, also called poetic jokes (Chiaro 1992: 87) present many of the same problems as poetry when they are translated. Like the punster, the poet has at their disposal a variety of options within the language which they can exploit to create a stylistic effect. As these options tend to be typical only of the source language, it follows that poetry and puns tend to encounter similar difficulties when an attempt is made at translation. Some jokes are worth comparing to poetry in terms of the density of translation obstacles to be overcome and, whether easy or difficult to translate, like poetry, they are not exactly mirrored in their translated form. (Chiaro, 1992: 88)

Notes

[1] The term 'script' introduced by Schank and Abelson (1977) is defined as a coherent set of fact and rules associated with a particular situation, which the human mind has absorbed in the process of learning.

[2] To the already classical examples *Ciorapi pentru bărbați din bumbac* or *Genți din piele de damă* we can add *Şapca pentru ceferişti cu fundul roşu*, an example taken from the Romanian newspaper „Gândul", March 17, 2008.

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